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ABSTRACT

Recent advances in psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, and information processing theory have produced several notions that have revolutionized previous conceptions of reading and what it means to understand. These notions support the idea that more emphasis should be placed on reading comprehension skills in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom. An approach to reading instruction based on teaching specific reading comprehension skills rather than passages in readers, teaching process rather than product, brings the students to conscious awareness of the processes involved in understanding what they read and provides a sense of confidence in their ability to read anything. The lessons are easy to write and can be most effective when they use real materials. The skill focus accomplishes more if presented in the context of a total ESL reading program including intensive reading, extensive reading, and practice in reading rate improvement. (MSE)

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READING SKILLS INSTRUCTION IN ESL

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Reading in ESL is usually taught via readers, books which are collections of interesting articles or stories at the linguistic level of the students. Reading skills exercises are found among the many tasks which students are assigned to complete after doing the reading. However, the reading skills are usually not presented in a logical or developmental way, but rather as they are needed for mastering a particular passage. These reading activities may give the students practice in applying their knowledge of reading skills, but that is *testing* skills, not *teaching* them.

An ideal ESL/EFL reading program would consist of four types of activities, equally important and necessary:

- Training in specific reading skills
- Practice on graded reading materials (intensive reading)
- Practice in speeded reading
- Extensive reading of self-selected materials for pleasure

Many reading programs include the last three, but reading skills instruction is often missing. Reading skills and comprehension processes are important enough to be taught in their own right. By focussing on specific skills, the ESL student can learn ways of gaining meaning in English, and these skills can be applied to all of his/her other reading activities.

Recent advances in psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, and information processing theory have produced several notions which have revolutionized our conception of reading and what it means to understand. These notions support the idea that more emphasis should be placed on reading comprehension skills in the ESL classroom.

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Cognition vs. Metacognition

Metacognition was discussed by Flavell in the 1970's, and was related to reading comprehension by Brown (1980). Cognition implies having knowledge or skills. Metacognition refers to the awareness and conscious control of knowledge and skills (Stewart and Tei 1983).

A mundane example of this is the skill of tying shoes. If you have ever tried to teach a child how to tie his shoes, you have experienced the difference between knowing and knowing about knowing. You know how to tie the shoes, but explaining the process to the child is another story. In the teaching of reading, you know you can read, but are you aware of the processes involved in reading& Are you conscious of what you do when you read? Do you articulate these processes to your students?

Studies have shown that students who learn to become *conscious of their own reading processes* become *more skillful readers* (Stewart and Tei 1983). This would seem to be especially true of adolescent and adult students, who are accustomed to employing formal operational reasoning in learning.

The Reading Process

Goodman (1973), Smith (1973), Spiro (1980), and many others have written about reading comprehension as an interactive constructive process, in which the reader samples the text, guesses the meaning, and confirms the guess through further sampling of the text.

Try this experiment. Stop! Before you read the sentences below, read these directions:

Read only sentence one. Try to guess what the story is about.

Then read sentence two. Continue to guess what it's about.

Read sentence three. How did your "comprehension" change as you read each sentence.

1. He plunked down $5.00 at the window.

2. She tried to give him $2.50, but he refused to take it.

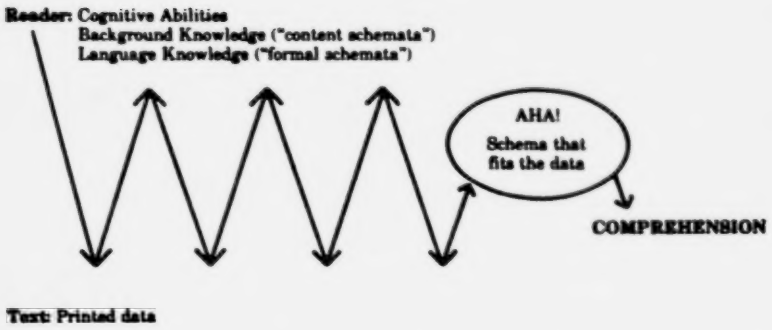
3. So she insisted on buying him a box of popcorn when they got inside.

(Lanzano and McKoy 1983)

As you sampled more of the text above, you checked your working hypothesis and made adjustments as necessary. As you made guesses, you were matching samples of the text with previous experiences and frameworks (schemata) in your mind. Schemata are frameworks which the reader brings to the text, and they are essential to comprehension (Rumelhart 1980). In other words, meaning isn't primarily in the text, but in what the reader constructs from a text relative to his/her own collection of schemata (Smith 1973).

This process can be represented in a diagram:

FIGURE 1
The Reading Comprehension Process



The reader samples the text, looks for a match, guesses, samples more of text, over and over again until a good match is made. Using schemata and reasoning skills to gain meaning is a concept-driven, "top-down" process. Using the text to gain meaning is a data-driven, "bottom-up" process. The two modes are used interactively by good readers to construct meaning.

Two types of schemata are indicated on the diagram: formal schemata (related to rhetorical structure) and content schemata (background knowledge of the content of the text). Carrell (1983), Bransford and Johnson (1972), and others have pointed out the importance of background knowledge in comprehension. ESL teachers have been encouraged to select texts which would minimize the effect of the lack of background knowledge (content shemata).

Eventually, however, our students will be faced with texts which are not so carefully controlled for background knowledge. They still must be able to feel confident that they have strategies for getting the meaning of what they read. As Rivers pointed out in 1978, many ESL students do not know *how* to read English texts. Helping students with the content schemata is necessary but not sufficient for helping them to improve their reading ability. ESL students need instruction to enable them to enhance both the top-down and bottom-up processing modes and to increase their repertoire of formal schemata. They need to learn how to sample the text. They need to be taught specific reading comprehension skills. This will result in a conscious awareness of the skills the students need to use and will give them a sense of mastery and confidence.

Reading Skills

There is more to reading skills than just skimming, scanning, and finding the main idea. The following list of skills is not meant to be exhaustive. Many skills overlap. Some are more fundamental than others.

1. Previewing. A quick once-over of the material to gain a hint of what is to come.

2. Predicting. Using knowledge of content and language to guess what's going to come next while you read.

3. Questioning. Asking questions in an inner dialog with the author.

4. Scanning. Rapidly finding specific information in a text.

5. Recognizing the topic. Finding out what you're reading about.

6. Stating main ideas. Knowing what the author is expressing about the topic.

7. Guessing the meaning of new words, using context clues and knowledge of word parts.

8. Recognizing patterns of organization. Seeing relationships between ideas, the over-all structure of a text.

9. Using signal words. Being able to see connections between ideas by the use of words such as first, then, later.

10. Drawing inferences. Reading between the lines; using evidence in the text to know things that are unstated.

11. Visualizing. Picturing, or actually drawing a picture or diagram of what is described in a text.

12. Paraphrasing. Re-stating texts in the reader's own words.

13. Using lexical clues to cohesion. Knowing the function of pronouns and other referents used between paragraphs.

14. Skimming. Quickly getting the gist of a passage or book.

15. Reading critically. Judging the accuracy of a passage with respect to what the reader already knows.

16. Drawing conclusions. Putting together information from several parts of the text and reducing or inducing additional ideas.

17. Summarizing. Shortening material by retaining and restating main ideas and leaving out details.

18. Reading faster. Necessary for improving comprehension because of the way the brain processes information.

19. Adjusting reading to suit purpose. Being able to choose speed and strategies needed for getting what is needed from a text.

These skills aren't new. But the approach which follows may be different for some teachers: lessons on reading skills can be presented as units of instruction. Teachers are accustomed to presenting units on the past perfect tense, or on partitives. Why not units on specific reading skills? If the students focus on one skill at a time, they can master the skill and then apply it in a variety of contexts.

When using this approach to teaching reading, the teacher presents a specific skill to the students with an explanation of the benefits to be derived from mastering the skill—a rationale for doing the exercises. Each skill is introduced at an uncomplicated level and then developed through a logical sequence of lessons. The emphasis is on the thinking processes involved with the goal of helping the students become consciously aware of the skill and how to monitor its use in getting meaning.

The Question of Levels

Because of their cognitive development, adolescent and adult students can benefit from lessons focussing on specific comprehension skills at all levels of English proficiency except the very basic beginning. The lessons shown in this paper are good for students at the intermediate level and up in terms of vocabulary and structure. If you are teaching beginners, the skills remain the same, but the vocabulary and grammar structures would obviously have to be simplified. (A few lessons for the upper beginner level have been included.)

Of all the skills to consider, there are a few which are essential for good comprehension:

1. Previewing
2. Identifying the topic/main idea
3. Recognizing relationships between ideas (patterns)

These are especially important for improving comprehension because they enable the reader to use top-down and bottom-up modes interactively.

Previewing

When readers preview a text before reading it, they immediately begin to guess content, and their minds begin the process of matching what they see in the preview with what they already know about the content. They begin to make assumptions about what they will find in the text. Questions are raised, and they read actively to seek the answers.

Previewing Sequence

The students should be given a reason for doing this work.

Rationale: Most people who are planning a trip look at maps to plan their route. This is a good practice in reading, too. Once you have a hint of what is to come, it is much easier to understand what you read. These activities will help you to make more accurage guesses about the meaning of the text.

Lesson 1

a. Bring in several pieces of mail. Ask students to make guesses about what is inside based on:
   - size, shape, and color of envelope
   - handwritten or typed
   - return address
   - postmark
   - thickness
   - other features

   Then open the letters and see if their guesses were accurate.

b. Bring in a collection of many types of books. Tell students they should choose one and they will have two or three minutes to find out as much as they can about the book. Give them the following checklist:
   - Read front and back covers.
   - Check author's name.
   - It is fiction or non-fiction?
   - Is it a textbook?
   - Look at the table of contents.
   - Check length.
   - Guess what it is about.

   Then tell the students to share this information with another student or with the whole class.

Lesson 2 Previewing a chapter or shorter selection.

a. Explain these steps to the students, using a class text.
   - Read the title.
   - Look at any pictures or diagrams.
   - Read any sub-headings.
   - Read the first paragraph, or first sentence in a shorter text.
   - Read the first line of each paragraph.
   - Read the last paragraph, or last sentence in a shorter text.

b. Hand out a short passage of about 400 words, followed by about ten questions. Allow the students two minutes to preview the passage according to the steps listed above. Then ask the students to answer the questions without reading the passage.

   Students can often answer more than half the questions correctly, which impresses them. They gain a great deal of confidence from this demonstration.

(Mikulecky 1983)

Benefit of Previewing

- Previewing allows the reader to establish the context, subject matter, and level of difficulty of what they will read.

- Having established the context, the student's background knowledge makes it possible to read for meaning, even if many of the words and syntactical structures are unfamiliar.
- Previewing encourages the student to develop the habit of a quick once-over before reading, which is the groundwork for learning to skim.
- Previewing leads the student to recognize that it is not necessary to know the meaning of every word to understand the text. ***Previewing should be a regular activity in every class which requires the student to read.***

(Notice that you can use actual materials in teaching previewing. This is not an abstract exercise, but a skill which the student will use regularly as soon as they are aware of what a powerful strategy previewing can be.)

Topics

The first step in understanding a text is to establish the topic. In other words, what is the text *about*, and how do the details relate to the topic and to each other?

Good readers do this in their own language. ESL readers need help in transferring this ability to English. Unfortunately, many of our students are not good readers in their native language; it is essential therefore that we provide instruction in how to determine topics and generalizations.

The exercises which follow were designed to develop the thinking processes needed to quickly and accurately recognize the topic of a text. You can construct a set of similar lessons for your ESL students at any level, using vocabulary and passages appropriate for your students.

In order to appreciate the thinking processes involved in this sequence of lessons, you should do a few of them. (When using these lessons with students, it is best for them to work in pairs or small groups.)

1. *Finding the Topic (Thirty Lessons in Outlining, Level 1)*
Directions: Read each list of words below. In each list there is a word that tells about all the other words. Find the word and write it on the answer sheet.

1. pepper nutmeg cinnamon spices cloves ginger

2. beetle fly grasshopper insects bee mosquito

(Furbush et al. 1975:1)

Here are similar exercises using beginning level vocabulary.
Directions: In each group of words, there is a word or phrase that tells about all the other items. Find the word or phrase and circle it. The first one is done.

a. wash the clothes sweep the floor fix the radio
clean the kitchen (jobs around the house)

b. basement living room house bathroom
dining room kitchen

2. *Stating the Topic (Thirty Lessons in Outlining, Advanced)*
Directions: On the answer sheet write a topic for each group of words.

1. Mississippi St. Lawrence Hudson Delaware Potomac Rio Grande Sacramento

2. well spring reservoir lake river

(Ross and Culliton 1971: 4)

3. *Stating the topic and telling which item doesn't belong. (Thirty Lessons in Outlining, Advanced)*
Directions: Each list of words has one item which does not belong. Write the topic. Then cross out the word which does not belong.

1. sanctuary lair bridge citadel fortress ghetto shelter

2. pediatrician internist obstetrician surgeon psychologist general practitioner

(Ross and Culliton 1971:5)

4. *Dividing a list of words into two topics*
Directions: Each list of words can be divided into two topics. Then write the words under the right topic. Work with another student.

a. chair table book bookcase magazine bed desk letter newspaper chest

b. noun clouds sun adjective star verb moon pronoun planet article

(Mikulecky 1983)

5. *Recognizing groups of sentences which can or cannot be considered paragraphs due to the relationship between the sentences.*
Directions: Read each group of sentences. If you think the sentences in a group would make a paragrpah, put a check (✓) in margin. Be ready to explain your choices.

A. The president made an important speech on Sunday.
Seven Russian astronauts went to the moon.
Dr. Smith won an award for his excellent work at the City Hospital.
The movie was exciting, but it was much too long.

B. Music is important in every part of the world.
Every country has music for holidays and for special times like birthdays.
People also sing songs at weddings and play music at funerals.
Children all around the workd learn to sing and play the songs of their country.

C. Mary was very busy at work today.
In the morning, her computer broke down and she had to call the repairman.
The phone rang all day long, and her secretary went home with a headache at noon.
And Mary had an important meeting with her boss at 4:00.

6. *Recognizing the topics of paragraphs*
Directions: Read the paragraph. Then read the three possible topics. One topic is too general, one is too specific, and one is just right. Work with another student, and mark the answers.

a. Some students of English as a Second Language do not want to read novels. Novels are not true, so these students think that they cannot learn from them. But students can learn a lot from reading novels. They can learn how to use English in everyday life. Reading novels and stories is very important for ESL students.
_____ novels
_____ every day life
_____ why read novels

b. The Dam family came to Bostom from Vietnam in 1980. The five members of the family were: Mr. Dam, Mrs. Dam, Cung, Foung, and Mio. They found an apartment on a nice street, and made new friends. The three children went to a school near by. Mr. and Mrs. Dam found jobs and began to learn English. They were happy to be living together in Boston.
_____ living in Boston
_____ The Dam family in Boston
_____ five members in the family

Some of the benefits of teaching lessons on topics are:

• The format of these lessons makes them useful for reviewing and reinforcing vocabulary already presented, introducing new words in context, and reinforcing semantic associations that the students must develop in English.

• The sequence need not take a lot of time. The students catch on quickly. The teacher should be careful to move on as soon as the class is ready to do so.

• The lessons can be individualized.

• The students begin to develop the habit of asking questions while they read. This helps them pay attention.

• You can find lessons like these in the books you have in your classroom. Or, *you can make up your own*. The lessons based on sorting words and stating the topics of lists of words are very easy to write. As for paragraphs, they can be taken from books, newspapers, magazines, or written by you. In other words, you can take actual materials and use them to teach reading skills.

Patterns of Organization

After the reader has an idea of the topic of the text, the next important

question is "How has the author organized the ideas in the text?" Once the organizational pattern is apparent, the reader can begin to predict what will come next.

Every culture has a somewhat different way of organizing ideas. The relationships between ideas which are taken for granted in one's native language don't always hold in a second language (Kaplan 1966). Studies by Meyer (1977) and others have shown that *readers understand and remember best those materials which are organizationally clear to them*. You can provide your ESL students with a very powerful tool if you introduce them to the common patterns of organization used in English prose, and if you also teach them the words which signal those patterns. Then they can consciously use the organizational pattern to make sense of what they are reading. The paragraphs and exercises in this section come from *Tactics in Reading, Line by Line*, and *Reading and Thinking in English*.

A good way to introduce the notion of patterns of organization and its usefulness is to present these drawings to the students. Allow them about one minute to study the set, and then ask the students to reproduce the drawings from memory.

The conclusion is almost always the same: Number 2 is the most difficult one to remember. Why? Because there is no pattern.

After a discussion of how important patterns are in helping us to learn and remember, the students will be ready for an introduction to a few common organization patterns in English. Four of the simplest and most common are:

- Time Order (chronology, sequence)
- Comparison/Contrast
- Simple listing of related facts
- Cause and effect

What follows are *sample lessons*. Each pattern should be introduced and practiced in a developmental fashion. Some patterns are more difficult for the students than other, and the teacher should be sensitive to how much practice is needed in order for the students to feel they have mastered a particular pattern.

Patterns of Organization—Time Order

The following words are clues or signal words often used when writing in chronological or time order:

first	soon	later on	at the end
next	later	in the meantime	at last
last	finally	afterwards	right away
in the end	eventually	not long after	in the beginning
dates	times		

Directions: The paragraphs below are written in time order. Underline the signal words and then make a list of the events in the order in which they happened. The signal words are already italicized in paragraph 1.)

1. Maria is doing very well in her career at the art museum. *First*, she worked in the museum gift shop on week-ends. *After that*, she became the manager of the shop. *Next*, she was an assistant to the museum director for seven years. *Finally*, last year, she became director of the new modern art section of the museum. Maria is very pleased with her success in her work.

   Topic: Maria's success at the museum.

   Signals: First *What happened?* worked in gift shop

2. The surprise birthday party for Tom was a big success. First, Tom's brother Joe took him out to dinner. Then, some of Tom's friends went to his house. They put up balloons and other decorations. Later Tom's best friend brought cake and ice cream. After that, about fifteen more friends arrived at Tom's house. Finally, Joe brought Tom home. Everyone shouted, "SURPRISE!" What a good time they all had!

   Topic:

   Signal words: *Events:*

3. Henry needed a new passport for his trip to Paris. So on Saturday morning, he tried to get one. Early in the morning, he went to the post office to fill out an application. Then he went to the photography shop to have his picture taken. After that, he went to the bank to get the money the passport fee. Later, he took the passport application, the pictures, and the money to the post office. But by then it was closed for the day. Finally, Henry decided to go home and try again another day.

   Topic:

   Signal words: *What happened?*

Patterns of Organization—Comparison/Contrast

A. Comparison of a Mercedes-Benz and a Volkswagen.

How are they alike?

1. Both have gasoline or diesel engines.
2. Both have 4 wheels.
3. Both are used for personal transportation.
4. Both are made in Germany.

How are they different?

1. Cost of each.
2. Cost of fuel and upkeep.
3. Size.
4. Status.
5. Comfort.

B. Comparison of your country and the United States.

How are they alike?

1.

How are they different?

1.

(Mikulecky 1983)

C. This paragraph compares two animals, a whale and an elephant. Read to find out how they are alike and how they are different. Fill in the table below. Use the italicized words to help you.

The elephant and the whale may seem very *different*, but they are really *a lot alike*. The elephant is a land animal, and the whale lives in the sea. And, of course, the two animals are very different in appearance. but they are actually very *similar*. They are the largest land and sea animals alive today. *Both* whales and elephants breathe air and bear their young alive. And, sadly, people are killing *both* whales and elephants. So someday these giant creatures may *share* the same fate: extinction.

Similarities

How are elephants and whales alike?

Differences

How are elephants and whales different?

Here are other words often used as signals of a comparison or a contrast. Write "S" next to words which signal similarity, and write "D" next to words which signal difference.

but	faster than	in the same way
different	rather	instead
however	bigger	yet
like	on the contrary	similarly
contrary to	as	on the other hand

(Mikulecky 1983)

Patterns of Organization—Simple Listing

In the paragraph below, the author wants to tell several facts or ideas relating to the same topic.

People have *many* reasons for learning a second language. *Some* need a new language because they plan to travel or do business in another country. *Others* learn a new language in order to go to a university. *Many* people learn a new language because they have left their home land and are living in a new country. And *a few* learn a second language just for fun.

The *italicized* words are signals that the author gives to let the reader know that s/he is writing a list of related facts.

Topic: Reasons for learning a second language

Signals:	Facts:
Some	For travel
Others	For study
Many	For living in a new country
a few	For fun

Directions. In the next paragraphs, the signal words are italized. Fill in the topic and the facts below.

1. Last week, Dr. Smith sent a memo to his nurse, Mrs. Ruth. He was not happy with her work. *First*, he said she was late almost every day. He *also* said that she used the phone for personal calls. He stated that she talked too loud and disturbed the other doctors in the office. And Dr. Smith *also* complained that Mrs. Ruth was very rude to the patients. *Finally*, he suggested that she should plan to look for a new job.

Topic:

Signals: Facts:

2. Industrialized countries have *many* characteristics in common. They *all* have large cities where most of the people live in crowded conditions. They *also* have problems with air pollution. *In addition*, they need to find new sources of energy. *And a last common* concern is that they need to develop ways of keeping their factories modern and up to date.

Topic:

Signals: Facts:

Now you should be able to make a list of the words which are used to signal the simple listing pattern. Write at least ten signal words here:

1. also
2.
3.
4.
5.
6.
7.
8.
9.
10.

Patterns of Organization—Cause and Effect

When the author wants to explain the cause or causes of an event or situation, or show the effects of some event or situation, the writer organizes the text in a cause-effect pattern and uses signal words to inform the reader of this.

Exercise 1 Read the following statements and identify the cause and effect in each sentence. Circle the signal words.

Example:

Rainy weather can lead to an *increase in the number of auto accidents.*
cause *effect*

1. Many plane crashes are the result of human error.
2. Too much rich food can cause indigestion.
3. Epidemics are often the result of crowded living conditions.
4. A lack of exercise is one cause of poor health.
5. A poor diet sometimes causes permanent brain damage.
6. Using a radio in the bath tub can result in death from electrical shock.
7. Dirty air can lead to an increased rate of heart attacks.
8. Failure in college is often due to poor reading skills.

Now write a list of the words that are used to signal a cause-effect pattern:

1. result

Identifying Patterns

Directions: Here are four paragraphs about Sir Isaac Newton. Read each paragraph, and then choose one sentence from the extra sentences below and write the letter for that sentence next to the paragraph in which it would fit best. One of the sentences will not be used.

Paragraph 1

Sir Isaac Newton worked on many important scientific problems. First, there was his development of the laws of motion. He also made important discoveries about optics and the nature of color. His other work included ideas about astronomy, chemistry, and logic. And finally, he produced the Principia, a book which explained his law of universal gravitation.

Paragraph 2

Isaac Newton was born in England in 1642. He went to Trinity College, Cambridge University, in 1661 at the age of 18. In 1665, the plague swept through England, and Newton left school and returned to his family home in Woolsthorpe. It was there that he began most of his best work. He published his famous book, the Principia, in 1682. And in 1699 he was made the director of the English Mint. Sir Isaac Newton died in 1727 and he is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Paragraph 3

Although the two men were both geniuses, Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein have very little else in common. True, they both did their most important and famous work before the age of 26. But there are great differences between them. "Proper behavior" was most important to Newton, while Einstein liked to be different. Newton spent his later years working for the government, while Einstein spent his entire life doing science.

Paragraph 4

Newton did most of his best work during his stay in Woolsthrope from 1665 to 1668. Many writers have tried to find out what caused him to produce all of those great ideas in such a short time. Was it the peace and quiet of the small town that caused his creative powers to increase? The causes may never be known, but the effects of Newton's genius are still felt today.

Extra Sentences

1. Some people think that a falling apple caused Newton to think of the law of universal gravitation.

2. Present-day physicists have discovered limits to the mechanical universe which Newton described.

3. In addition, he invented differential and integral calculus.

4. They say Isaac Newton never smiled, but Albert Einstein had a great sense of humor.

5. In fact, by age 26, he had already completed most of his best scientific work.

Conclusions

This paper has described an approach to reading instruction which is based on teaching specific reading comprehension skills rather than passages in readers (teaching process rather than product). By bringing the students to conscious awareness of the processes involved in understanding what they read, you can provide them with a sense of confidence in their ability to read anything that comes their way.

Examples were shown of the kinds of lessons you can design to teach units which focus on specific reading skills. These lessons are not difficult to write, and furthermore, the ones you make up, using real materials, can be the most effective for your class.

This skill focus accomplishes the most if it is presented in the context of a total ESL reading program which includes intensive reading, extensive reading, and practice in reading rate improvement.

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